

Food For The Poor . . .

# Takes Fishing Adage To Next Stage

By KATERI LIKOUDIS



Crowds of children run and gather outside their new mountain top school building in Abre da las Yayas.

SANTO DOMINGO — The old adage goes: “Give a man a fish and feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish, and you feed him for a lifetime.” Food for the Poor (FFP), now the largest Catholic international aid group in the Caribbean, is taking this philosophy to the next level with sustainable aquaculture projects in the Dominican Republic, one of poorest — yet most beautiful — countries

essary fats, animal proteins, and other micro-nutrients. Food for the Poor, in conjunction with Taiwan International Cooperation and Development Fund (ICDF), is using the environmentally sound practice of aquaculture to help alleviate the malnutrition and poverty.

At the La Siembre Vieja Tilapia Farm project, Food for the Poor and Taiwan ICDF have built five large ponds where tilapia will be

cooperative and the rest will be sold, with the proceeds going back to production, making it an important, self-sustainable project. Richly fertilized water is drained from the ponds to irrigate the fruit trees and vegetables planted in the surrounding areas.

Food for the Poor has also established a very successful chicken farm at the Trinity Village Agricultural Center, where 4,000 birds at various stages are raised. They are cleaned and sold on sight. At this center, there are three tilapia ponds. Greenhouses are also constructed, and gardens where lemons, cabbages, papayas, peppers, and avocados grow.

Education is another of the most sustainable projects that FFP undertakes throughout the 17 Latin American and Caribbean countries where it is a growing presence, training men and women to work in sustainable and environmentally friendly farming practices and trades.

In these isolated mountain regions, many children have long and dangerous treks to schools that are often unfit for learning. Many children do not attend school at all.

My recent trip to the Dominican Republic and Haiti with Food for the Poor in November began with a visit to the Hogar Rosa Duarte school and home for girls, where I was greeted by 300 enthusiastic smiling children between the ages of eight and fourteen.

One of my travel companions, and host, was Food for the Poor's executive director, Angel Aloma, who explained that many of these girls came to the home as orphans, and had never experienced the joys of having running water until Food for the Poor put in a 10,000-gallon water cistern, and most had never learned to read or write before being brought to the school. The girls in the school take classes in baking, computers, sewing, and beauty.

Another of FFP's latest good works is in Abra de las Yayas, where FFP constructed the Abre Las Yayas community school. The town is very isolated, and the roads — paths, really — cut

into the mountainside are steep and difficult to navigate. We had to cross three rivers to reach our destination. The group works with “From Our Home to Your Home, Inc.,” a nonprofit organization in the Dominican Republic, founded by Fr. Ken Hasselback and headed by Arturo Castro. One of Food for the Poor's donors recently passed away, leaving an amount of money in her will that would make new homes and a school a reality in this desperate mountain village.

Together, the two organizations provided the people with a sturdy, two-room schoolhouse with plenty of room for the many eager children in the community to learn under a safe roof.

Houses were built for 54 families living in the most deplorable conditions. Most had been living with as many as eight people crammed into a one-room shack made of rusty sheet metal, sticks and mud, and whatever other scrap materials were available. These types of homes become dangerous when winds and heavy rains threaten to flood them, or cause them to collapse. Squalid conditions like these also prevent children from getting proper rest, and make it impossible to learn their school subjects while at home.

Thanks to FFP and its donors, De Mi Casa a Su Casa and Taiwan ICDF, families now have sustainable farming methods, clean, well-built houses to shelter themselves from the elements, and the children have a safe place to learn. All these things combined are the basics that people need to break out of the cycle of poverty they live in, and make their isolation less debilitating.

Driving up the long, steep, rocky road called Banica Drive (the international highway) in what is called La Linea — The Line — that separates Haiti and the Dominican Republic, I look on either side as worlds apart.

The terrain is very similar, with huge hills, but one side — Haiti — looks like a desert in contrast to the lush Dominican side. The country is almost completely deforested, causing serious soil erosion and flooding.

Food is scarce in Haiti, evident in the bloated bellies, carrot-colored hair, and fatigue that plague many of the children I saw. Throughout rural Haiti, finding water and bringing it home is a daily chore, and often children have the responsibility of traveling long distances to find and transport it. There is so little, in fact, that people are reluctant to boil it, knowing they will lose even a small amount. That and the lack of sanitation lead to waterborne illness in a land where there is no medical care.

Mere existence here is primitive and heart wrenching to witness.

I visited a family of eight, languishing outside their hut made of sticks and mud, that was no larger than the tiny kitchen in my Philadelphia rowhouse. Imagine the mess that follows each rain and the labor it takes to keep a small fire burning in a cooking pit. This family had no plans to eat that day, and they hadn't in several. A common practice is for older kids in a family to alternate the days they will have meals.

can your effort make any difference?”

The old man looked at the starfish in his hand, then threw it safely into the waves. He turned to the boy and said, “It made a difference to that one.”

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(Kateri Likoudis is a photographer in Philadelphia. Readers can write to her at: [klikoudis@gmail.com](mailto:klikoudis@gmail.com). Also, see the full set of more than 200 photographs from the Dominican Republic at: [www.flickr.com/photos/kateriphoto/](http://www.flickr.com/photos/kateriphoto/).)

years has inspired his parishioners to build entire villages in the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere. A very modest gift, pocket change really, contributed by each family at Fr. Richard Martin's Church of the Nativity in Burke, Va., has supported the construction of sturdy homes for 50 families in Nativity Village at El Corte, Haiti, and beyond.

It started with an idea Fr. Martin had while walking his dog just before Lent ten years ago.

“What if each family would forego one order of French fries? What if they would subtract one topping from their weekly pizza?” asked Fr. Martin.

When he calculated the numbers, Fr. Martin figured this: 2,500 families saving just 50 cents a day for the 40 days of Lent would translate to \$50,000! A huge result from so little sacrifice.

From Fr. Martin's effort, Operation Starfish was born, cosponsored by Food for the Poor. Once the people of Fr. Martin's parishioners realized what they could accomplish — and how simple it was — the idea, the optimism and the effort spread.

What I witnessed as an outsider was a miracle for those who had no means and little hope of ever living in a decent shelter or having ample, clean, potable water.

For each double-unit home, Food for the Poor has set up badly needed sanitation blocks, each with a latrine and shower stall. A water well and reservoir constructed near the village is designed for gravity flow to two spigots in the village.

In addition to housing, Food for the Poor — with its Dominican partner, De Mi Casa Su Casa, headed by Arturo Castro and the

Church of the Nativity — has undertaken education and sustainable agriculture projects in El Corte. Food for the Poor has assembled a community center, school building, and chicken farm, while training locals in related construction skills.

During the time I was there, each family received two live chickens, bags of rice and beans, containers of powdered milk and cooking oil — a substantial amount for people who worry constantly about how they will feed themselves and their children.

To end poverty entirely is a daunting task, but this is where the lens of Operation Starfish focuses best. When his parishioners felt overwhelmed with the task challenging them, Fr. Martin responded with a story.

“As a young boy walked down the beach, he noticed an old man



La Siembre Vieja Community Housing project is a rainbow of color in the mountains. FFP has built 60 of these brightly painted homes, along with latrine projects, a water project, and a rural school.

ahead of him picking up starfish and tossing them into the sea. Catching up with the man, the boy asked why he was doing this. The old man explained to the boy that the starfish would die if left in the morning sun.

“But the beach goes on for miles and there are millions of starfish!” exclaimed the boy. “How

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Sister Julia, from Spain, resides at the Hogar Rosa Duarte School, a mother figure to many of the young orphans.

in the Caribbean, where a quarter of the people live in grinding poverty.

In El Cercado, a rural area in the mountain region that borders Haiti, the main economic activity is agriculture, always a struggle due to overworked land, inadequate economic and agricultural resources, as well as environmental issues such as recurrent drought, floods, deforestation, and soil erosion.

Because of the environmental factors that hinder successful farming practices, many of these poor families' diets are lacking in nec-

raised, and they will fund all materials and train employees to maintain farms and production.

Tilapia — a native of the Holy Land where it is known as “St. Peter's fish” — are high in protein and vital nutrients like Omega-3 fatty acids, antioxidants, calcium, phosphorus, and B-complex vitamins.

The small fish are easy to farm raise and reproduce quickly, providing constant, economical meals for many impoverished families. Part of the tilapia harvest goes to needy families in the area, a portion goes to families in the



The Siembra Nueva Talapia Project: Where there are five ponds, of the 70 total in the Dominican Republic. In the surrounding areas, lemon and avocado trees are planted and fertilized when the ponds are drained. Eventually these ponds will produce 75,000 salable fish per year.

## Helpers In Arlington

On this recent trip to Haiti, I met a remarkable man who for ten



Andrea Montero Rodriguez is one of the recipients of a new home at La Siembre Vieja. Here, she shows us where she had lived before the new new house was built.



Andrea Montero Rodriguez stands on the porch of her beautiful new home and tells us that she prays to God that she will live a little longer, so that she may enjoy her new house.